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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRUSSELS 000430

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SUBJECT: THREE FLEMISH MAJORITY PARTIES MAKE PROJECTIONS
FOR JUNE REGIONAL ELECTIONS

1. (U) Summary: The three major Flemish parties are in full gear campaigning for the regional elections June 7, 2009. Unable to buy more than four small TV segments, the parties are reaching out to voters through posters, mail, grass roots campaigning and any free publicity they can get in the news. The two largest parties, the Christian Democrats (CD&V) and the Liberals (OpenVLD), expect good results with their strong organizations, reputations and big-name candidates. Flemish Minister- President Kris Peeters is a popular politician, and his party hopes his success at leading the Flemish government will overcome any lack of trust suffered by the party's problems at the national level--the fall of Leterme government and Fortis scandal. The CD&V will focus on good regional government and their platform of economic stability and good social programs in the campaign. CD&V expects to receive close to 20% of the vote. The OpenVLD has expressed confidence in its electoral prospects and expects to rejoin with the CD&V and the Socialists (sp.a) to form a government. OpenVLD believes its standard bearer in the concurrent European elections, former Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, will attract voters and is also pleased with polls showing voters think of the OpenVLD as a stable party with good ideas for the economy. The third major party, the sp.a predicts it will obtain at least fifteen percent of the vote. The sp.a has been going through a period of rebuilding and soul-searching. Some members would like to stay in government, others are thinking about opposition. The make-up of the post June Flemish government depends on how well the sp.a polls and how well the smaller parties do on June 7. The CD&V and Open VLD may be able to choose between the sp.a and another party to form a government. The June regional elections will be the number one political consideration for all political parties in Belgium, especially Flanders, where they are considered as important as national elections. End Summary.

2.(U) With the launch of regional election campaigns March 7, PolOff and PolIntern met with representatives of the three majority parties that form the Flemish regional government to obtain the insiders look at strategy and prospects. The campaign season lasts a statutorily set three month period before voters head to the polls on June 7, and the major parties have begun their campaigns in earnest. We met with the he Christian Democrat's (CD&V's) International Affairs Director Peter Gijssels and Spokesman Luk Vanmaercke, the Liberals' (OpenVLD) International Affairs Advisor Filip Buntinx, and Socialist (sp.a) Vice Chairman and member of Parliament Dirk Van der Maelen. The Belgian law limits public television advertisement to about three times for four minutes for the major parties. The main outreach campaign advertising will take the form of posters, brochures,

leaflets, and direct mail. Curiously, Belgian law bans parties handing out trinkets and knick knacks with party names and slogans during the three month campaign. Party organizers and volunteers will go door to door and appear at local events to reach out to voters. Candidates will of course use news appearances and TV debates to get free and unlimited advertising.

Christian Democrats (CD&V)

13. (U) CD&V Minister President Kris Peeters will once again top the electoral list in Antwerp Province for the CD&V. According to Gijssels and Vanmaeëcke, the CD&V will focus on Peeter's popularity and the success of his stewardship of the Flemish government for the past five years. Peeters was ranked as the second most popular Flemish politician by Flemish voters in a March 8 poll published in "The Standaard". The CD&V campaign on the Flemish government's balanced budget, and completion of all parts of its platform, save state reform and greater autonomy for Flanders. Issues they will focus on is the economy in Flanders and second social services and health care stemming from the parties Christian values and roots. The CD&V and its then partner NVA (New Flemish Alliance), which obtained 26 percent of the vote together in 2004, were committed to the now-stalled state reform. Gijssels predicts their opponents will try to tie the CD&V to the national government, where the December fall of Yves Leterme's government over possible influencing of judges has cost the party support.

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14. (C) Looking ahead to June, Vanmaercke predicted the CD&V would receive close to twenty percent, OpenVLD eighteen percent and sp.a around fifteen percent. He surmised the three current governing parties would likely go along governing, as they were likely to receive a majority. One outside possibility would be to take in the NVA if they polled well. The CD&V worked well with the NVA, and believes they worked better together than apart.

Open VLD

15. (C) The OpenVLD seemed to be the most comfortable with its situation. Buntinx said recent polling showed that voters thought of their party as the party of stability and reason. The OpenVLD has been polling within a few percentage points of the CD&V, and expects to rejoin a CD&V - OpenVLD - sp.a government. Buntinx said his party will try to capitalize on the CD&V's national problems, and remind voters of the good stewardship of former OpenVLD Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt; Verhofstadt is heading the European Parliament list for the EP elections that will be held concurrently with the regional. Buntinx said his party's main challenges were the relatively unknown head of the regional list, Flemish Finance Minister Dirk Van Mechelen, and the threat on the right from Lijst DeDecker (LDD). LDD is a new party headed by former OpenVLDer and populist Jean-Marie DeDecker, who has polled between ten and fifteen percent in recent polls. DeDecker claims that his party best represents voters on the right, unaffected with the tilt of the CD&V and OpenVLD to the center. When asked about the sp.a's prospects, Buntinx admitted they had no strong or popular candidates that could wow voters, but he doubted they would do so poorly that they could not join another three part coalition. Buntinx downplayed the possibility of a government that included LDD, due to hard feelings between DeDecker and OpenVLD leaders.

Socialists (sp.a)

16. (C) Sp.a Vice-Chairman Dirk Van der Maelen gave an optimistic readout of his parties prospects, and he expects a few percentage points better than the 14-15 projected in

recent polls. He views the current economic crisis as an opportunity to attract voters back who have drifted away from the sp.a in recent years. Sp.a's current campaign has proved to be a quite success with its new slogan, "Sp.a. nu zeker" (Sp.a now for sure . . . now's the time). Sp.a had its worst historical outcome in the 2007 national elections and has the second smallest number of seats of any social democratic party in Europe, after Ireland. Van der maelen attributes this decline to the party's loss of message and pragmatism during years in government.

17. (C) Van der Maelen is one of the leaders in his party trying to pull the sp.a back to its leftist, worker, social-democratic roots. He told Poloff that there was an internal struggle between the old guard and the parties younger members who want to fight for votes in the center. Van der Maelen believes that is a losing proposition, as there are already two parties in the center and the sp.a should focus on workers rather than well educated socially liberal professionals. This struggle translates into a similar internal debate on whether the party should join government again or sit in opposition like they have at the national level after the 2007 loss. Van der Maelen also noted the Liberals and the Christian Democrats might opt to form a right wing government without sp.a and bring NVA on board. He even believes that LDD might be an option. He suspects the OpenVld in particular want a right wing government to prevent further loses to LLD, who currently is at ten percent.

Comment

18. (C) In the past the Liberals and the Christian Democrats have collectively earned 40-42 percent, bringing the sp.a into government in order to form a majority. It is interesting to note that the sp.a is not part of the national government, but have been part of the regional government for several years. As aforementioned, it is not sure whether the

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sp.a will join government or be in opposition. There is also the possibility of the CD&V and OpenVLD to not ask Sp.a to join them. Depending on how the NVA performs, there is a possibility that CD&V and NVA will rebuild relations and restore their former cartel. Just as CD&V and OpenVLD, NVA also has a popular candidate, Bart de Wever. De Wever appeared in a game show and gained the "most intelligent man" title. Also depending how the conservative party Lijst DeDecker performs, there is a possibility of OpenVLD to ask them to join in government. The Liberals would like a right wing government to prevent further loses to LDD. There are two months until election time, and a lot is still to be determined. What seems clear now is that the CD&V and OpenVLD will gain the popularity votes. Who will join them in government is undetermined.

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